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“IT’S THE AMBIENCE”

Thomas C. Galligan, Jr.*

A few years ago, I was in a pub in Dublin with my son Patrick. We were sitting at the bar drinking Guinness. To my right was an Irishman, quickly downing one brandy after another. My son was on my left and to Patrick’s left was a Dubliner drinking Smithwick’s. Pat’s neighbor was regaling us with stories about his trip to the United States to watch the Irish football¹ team play in the World Cup. The match he attended was in Houston, and it was in the late summer. He told us how he and his companions, after suitably preparing for the match at their hotel bar, decided to walk to the “pitch” because it was only one and one-half miles away. He laughed when he described a group of red-faced, sweaty, drunk Irish stopping to rest, recover, and recuperate for forty minutes under an overpass because “it was so [darned] hot.” When he delivered the punch line of his story, he let out a roar. The brandy drinker joined him. My son smiled, and I sipped my Guinness.

“Well it won’t be the last time ya screwed up, Mac,” said the bartender, authoritatively wiping the bar in front of me with his rag.

“You’re Irish,” the bartender said to me.

“I am,” I responded.

“I can tell, ya know.”

“How?” I asked.

“Ya got the paddy face,” he said and let out a self-satisfied sort of shrugging sound. “But not yer man there,” he said, nodding at Patrick. The brandy aficionado and the football fan leaned in to listen.

My son stayed cool.

“Well he’s my son,” I said. “And his name is Patrick!”

“Maybe,” the bartender said, “but he doesn’t have the paddy face.”

“Well my wife is only one quarter Irish,” I said. “And, I am half Swedish in addition to the Irish.”

He looked at Patrick carefully. “HMMMMM. That could be it.”

Our other two friends nodded in agreement.

I sipped my Guinness again and sighed. I wanted to say something intelligent. I wanted to fit in. I liked the place and the people. And I wanted them to like me.

“Why,” I asked, taking one more drink of beer, “does Guinness taste so much better in Ireland?” I had thought it might sound deep and respectful towards Ireland and one of its distinctive products. But, when it came out it sounded like the dumbest touristy thing one could ever imagine—maybe worse.

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¹ Translate to soccer for older Americans.

The proprietor threw his rag over his left shoulder in a clichéd sort of a way, clearly aware he was playing a role, and crossed his arms across his chest. The Houston walker and the brandy binger also crossed their arms across their chests. The bartender furrowed his lips and his brow. He paused. He uncrossed his arms and rubbed his chin à la Rodin's man there doing some thinking. And then he held his arms out wide at his side as if accepting a gift from the heavens. The barman looked to his right at the football nut and left at the Remy Martin maven. And then he looked straight at me, nodded, looked up at the sky and said:

"It's the ambience."

And he said it the way it's spelled: a-m-b-i-e-n-c-e. He said it so the last syllable rhymed with the last syllable in difference or deference. He didn't say it like I do where the last syllable rhymes with what some people call their mother's sisters.²

And do you know what—it is the ambience! The ambience is certainly why the Guinness tastes better in Ireland and it is certainly why I loved that pub so much.

But, for present purposes it is also what is so special about the SEALS conference. It is the ambience. Like, the folks in that pub, the people at SEALS are special and the feel is enjoyable, authentic, engaged, and comfortable all at the same time. It is a time and place for serious work and serious scholarly discussions. But it is also a place to share ideas, break bread, see old friends, be with one's family, and enjoy. I believe very much that work should be fun. A person spends so much time at work after all—a career's worth of time—that it ought to be fun. It ought to be enjoyable. And SEALS is fun. It is work and it is fun. That is a good combination for a positive experience.

When I first became a law professor in 1986, SEALS (I think then it was actually SEAALS—the Southeastern Association of American Law Schools) was a small, not very healthy conference. A few of my colleagues at LSU went; three, I think, and two were married to each other. But they lamented the fact that attendance was dwindling and they questioned whether the conference would survive.

By the time I became a dean at the University of Tennessee twelve years later and attended my first SEALS conference, it was becoming the hottest property around. Under the guidance of Russ Weaver and some notable others, the conference attracted several hundred attendees and many of their families. There were wonderful programs; there was tennis; there was golf. There were get-togethers. And there were always beaches. SEALS has always had the advantage of being an off-season conference, which I assume has helped with

² Personally, I would call them my "ants."

hotel rates. The places where snowbirds go in the winter to escape the winter are perfectly fine in the summer for those of us used to warm climes.

In those years—the late 90s and the early aughts—and still one of the highlights of the conference and one of the incredibly valuable pieces of programming were and are the young scholars' presentations. At the young scholars' workshops, junior faculty (at the time one from each member school) could present a work in progress to colleagues and an assigned mentor or reader. The presentations occur in a safe and supportive environment and provide the opportunity for some wonderful work to be birthed. There is nothing like having to present one's work that helps to move it along. But, wonderfully, the environment at SEALS is not competitive or stressful. It is peaceful and productive. The young scholar presents her work, gets feedback, and experiences what it is like to be one of the stars at an academic conference. The collaborative, collegial nature of those workshops is part of what creates the SEALS ambience.

Of course, one attends other conferences but, honestly, none compares to SEALS. Naturally, people meet people at SEALS and it always seems more like people meeting people to catch up, talk, have a meal, and reconnect. At other major conferences, people meet people too but there is not the same *joie de vivre*. Those other conferences, quite frankly, feel like "conventions."³ At those other "conventions," people are striving to be seen. They seem to want to be noticed. Once in New Orleans, at another major law professor event, I saw a group of about thirty law professors in rows, circling a table in a restaurant. In the middle sat one of the law professor luminaries of the day. It felt like the Oscar Awards without the red carpet, gowns, and statuettes. But it felt like being at that table was a celebrity event—a ticket to get.

SEALS just isn't like that. "Say it ain't so!" It ain't. SEALS is a place to be, not a place to be seen.

Don't get me wrong, people do make connections at SEALS. One year I was getting out of a pool and drying off when I started to talk to a man on the lounge chair next to me. It turned out he worked for West Publishing and by the end of the conversation we were discussing West publishing an Admiralty casebook that a colleague of mine and I had put together as materials, and within one year, the book was out.

When I was at Tennessee, the Tennessee faculty at SEALS tried to get together when we were at SEALS. Maybe we would go out for dinner, maybe we would go for a drink, maybe we would go for a run. We all tried to go to one another's presentations. As a faculty we got to know one another better at SEALS. And that very often helped us get along better back home when we had

³ When I was a wide-eyed idealist in the 60s, conventions were viewed with some scorn. It was where authority figures and those who worked for them did stupid stuff.

to deal with some difficult issue on which proverbial reasonable minds could disagree.

We Galligans always brought at least some of our children with us to SEALS, and we enjoyed the bike paths at Kiawah, the game arcade at Hilton Head, and the time together. On Amelia Island, we all went to American Beach, one of the most famous beaches frequented by African-Americans during the days of Jim Crow. We all learned a lesson from history that day.

Eleven years ago I left law teaching and deaning to become a college president at Colby-Sawyer College in New London, New Hampshire; I will not lie and say my worst fear was missing SEALS. To be honest, I thought I would miss teaching torts to first year law students the most, and I was right. But, right up there on the list of what I was sad to be leaving was SEALS. Russ and Gail Richmond kindly told me I could attend anytime, but I knew it would be sadly unlikely given the responsibilities of my new job. I knew there was not going to be anything like it for small college faculty, and I was right. There wasn't anything like SEALS. And I missed it.

But, now I am back in a law school. I am back at LSU where my teaching career began, and happily this summer, I was back at SEALS. But, my, oh my, has it changed! There are now staff helping to make the conference work. My executive assistant, Christina Hood, is one of them. And if the others are as great as she is, SEALS has the best staff in the world. They were certainly fantastic last summer. Christina tells me there were about 700 attendees at SEALS this year over the course of the entire week. That is a lot more people than when I last attended. Plus there are about three times the number of sponsors. Now, there is even a deans' program.

Concurrent sessions run from dawn until dusk for a full week. SEALS remains loaded with content. There are also more receptions. And, the membership has exploded. Virtually every region in America is represented in SEALS membership. There are international members in the Southeastern Association of Law Schools. And, we were in Boca Raton—Boca (although the prices were incredibly reasonable).

After eleven years away, I was amazed at the magnitude of what SEALS has become. It was really impressive. As I began my conference experience, I have to admit I had some doubt. Would it be the same; could it be the same? How would I react? You know you can't go home again, but then there it was. It was bigger, so it wasn't the same but, at the same time, like an answer to some Zen koan,⁴ it was still the same and it was great.

People reconnecting with people. Young scholars. Workshops where people across the generations talked about teaching. Great and small programs. Big programs. Meetings at the pool. Tennis. Places to run. Colleagues getting together far from home. Families.

⁴ I am not sure there really are answers to koans.

Things change. That’s what happens; it’s what should happen; it’s what always happens. But SEALS is still like a huge version of that Irish pub. The place may be full but what makes it special is the ambience—said like it’s spelled. The ambience really is the difference.